

### Meta-governance of partnerships for sustainable development: actors' perspectives on how the UN could improve partnerships' governance services in areas of limited statehood

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## Meta-Governance of Partnerships for Sustainable Development

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Actors' Perspectives on How the UN Could Improve Partnerships' Governance Services in Areas of Limited Statehood

Marianne Beisheim and Nils Simon



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## **Meta-Governance of Partnerships for Sustainable Development. Actors' Perspectives on How the UN Could Improve Partnerships' Governance Services in Areas of Limited Statehood**

*Marianne Beisheim and Nils Simon*

### **Abstract:**

In the context of negotiations on the Post-2015 or 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the process of formulating Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the United Nations (UN) (again) assigns an important role to multi-stakeholder partnerships. But how do actors view these partnerships more than ten years after the UN's engagement with them?

Our previous research found that transnational multi-stakeholder partnerships for sustainable development are neither as successful as their proponents claim nor as ineffective as their critics argue (Beisheim/Liese 2014). In light of these findings, we ask whether relevant actors argue that lessons learned with regard to partnerships' success conditions should be translated into rules and standards that guide the operations of existing and the development of new partnerships. This kind of meta-governance of partnerships could be exerted by state or non-state actors at the national or international level. Moreover, we distinguish between two broad functions of meta-governance: enabling and ensuring.

In this paper, we present first insights into actors' views on the meta-governance of partnerships. We focus on the actors in the UN-context, where reforms of the framework for partnerships are under debate.

### **Zusammenfassung:**

Im Kontext der Verhandlungen der Post-2015 bzw. 2030-Agenda für nachhaltige Entwicklung und der Formulierung der Ziele nachhaltiger Entwicklung (Sustainable Development Goals, SDGs) weisen die Vereinten Nationen (UN) Multi-Stakeholder-Partnerschaften erneut eine zentrale Rolle zu. Aber wie bewerten die beteiligten und betroffenen Akteure derartige Partnerschaften nach rund zehn Jahren Erfahrung?

Unsere bisherige Forschung zeigt, dass transnationale Multi-Stakeholder-Partnerschaften weder so erfolgreich sind, wie ihre Befürworter behaupten, noch so ineffektiv, wie es ihre Kritiker darstellen (Beisheim/Liese 2014). Vor dem Hintergrund untersuchen wir, ob relevante Akteure dafür plädieren, dass Erkenntnisse bezüglich der Erfolgsbedingungen von Partnerschaften in entsprechende Regeln und Standards umgesetzt werden sollen, die sowohl bestehende Partnerschaften als auch zukünftige Partnerschaften anleiten könnten. Diese Art von Meta-Governance könnte sowohl von staatlichen als auch von nicht-staatlichen Akteuren auf der nationalen oder internationalen Ebene betrieben werden. Außerdem unterscheiden wir zwei unterschiedliche Funktionen von Meta-Governance: ermöglichend und sicherstellend („enabling and ensuring“).

In diesem Working Paper präsentieren wir erste Einsichten zu den Perspektiven von Akteuren auf Meta-Governance für Partnerschaften. Dabei fokussieren wir auf Akteure im UN-Kontext, wo derzeit Reformen der Rahmenbedingungen für Partnerschaften debattiert werden.

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## List of Abbreviations

CBO	Community-based organization
CEB	United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination
CSD	Commission on Sustainable Development
ECOSOC	Economic and Social Council
EGM	Expert Group Meeting
GCO	Global Compact Office
GRI	Global Reporting Initiative
HLPF	High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development
IO	International organization
ISEAL	International Social and Environmental Accreditation and Labelling Alliance
JIU	United Nations Joint Inspection Unit
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
NRDC	Natural Resources Defence Council
OIOS	United Nations Office of Internal Oversight Services
PAOS	Partnership Advisory and Outreach Services
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SIDS	Small Island Developing States
UN	United Nations
UNDESA	United Nations Department for Social and Economic Affairs
UNDESA/DSD	United Nations Department for Social and Economic Affairs/Division for Sustainable Development
UNDG	United Nations Development Group
UNFIP	United Nations Fund for International Partnerships
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNGC	United Nations Global Compact
UNOP	United Nations Office for Partnerships
UNSG	United Nations Secretary General
WSSD	World Summit on Sustainable Development

## 1. Introduction: Partnerships for Sustainable Development at the United Nations<sup>1</sup>

In public-private or multi-stakeholder partnerships, non-state actors (such as civil society organizations and businesses) and state actors (such as international organizations (IOs) and national governments) collaborate across transnational, national, and local levels to provide collective goods (Beisheim/Liese 2014: 3; see also Pattberg et al. 2012; Glasbergen et al. 2007). In the past, these partnerships have been hailed by some as a “silver bullet” to promote implementation of international goals in the area of sustainable development governance. In this vein, Michael Doyle, Assistant Secretary-General of the UN, stated that “making business and all actors of civil society part of the solution is not only the best chance, it may also be the only chance the UN has to meet its Millennium goals” (Michael Doyle as quoted in Malena 2004: 2).

The UN Global Compact was one of the earliest and most visible partnership initiatives (Hoxtell et al. 2010; Rasche 2012). Partnerships gained further prominence after the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in 2002. In the months following the WSSD, 348 partnerships for sustainable development were registered in the database of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD). In addition, a large number of partnerships have been established though not registered with the CSD. These first-generation partnerships are now active in most international policy fields (Hale/Held 2011) and are representative of a shift towards collaborative approaches in global governance (Olsen et al. 2015; Andonova 2010). They have been promoted as a means of overcoming the widespread failure to implement international policies and targets (Nelson 2002; Reinicke/Deng 2000; Witte et al. 2003; Witte/Reinicke 2005). Many of them work toward the achievement of the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation of the WSSD, and other outcomes of global summits. In 2012, during the Rio+20 Partnership Forum, the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon praised them once again as “a central means of achieving our core mandates” (UN Secretary-General as quoted in Chandavarkar/Chaves 2012).

Partnerships for sustainable development will remain high on the agenda of the United Nations. In September 2015, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) will be meeting to adopt the “2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” and establish the SDGs as a successor to the MDGs. The 2030 Agenda (during the negotiation phase usually called the Post-2015 Agenda) will have a preamble and four sections: A declaration, the SDGs, means of implementation and the global partnership, and follow-up and review. Partnerships are again seen as central means of implementation for the ambitious agenda (cf. UNDG 2014: vi). UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon noted that “inclusive partnerships must be a key feature of implementation, at all levels” (UNSG 2014a: 24; see also UNGA 2013a).

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<sup>1</sup> This paper draws on research conducted by the SFB700/D1 project team and a variety of publications by that team, esp. on Beisheim/Liese 2014. Thanks go to Lili Mundle, Johanna Klotz and Florian Lair for input, proof reading and copy editing. A draft version of this paper has been presented at the 2014 ACUNS and the 2014 MOPAN annual meeting.

So far, however, there have been no systematic and critical evaluation attempts at the UN level, whether with the CSD's database, at the annual UN Partnership Fair or at Rio+20's Partnership Forum. Rather, we have seen mainly "showcasing" and the overall promotion of the partnership concept. This is problematic in light of findings from research on the effectiveness of partnerships. Pattberg et al. (2012) found evidence of widespread failure of many partnerships to perform as initially planned. They report that 37% of the first-generation partnerships registered with the CSD did not produce any output. Of the remaining 63%, only three out of five produced an output in line with the intended purpose of the partnership. In our own research project, we investigated the effectiveness of transnational partnerships for sustainable development in areas of limited statehood (i.e. an area that lacks the capacity to implement and enforce central decisions and/or the monopoly on the use of force). From 2006 to 2009, we investigated 21 different transnational partnerships in diverse issue areas such as health, water and sanitation, food, sustainable energy, and social rights (Beisheim/Liese 2014). We found that some of them have been testing and evaluating promising concepts, tools, and pilot projects. Our research has found that partnerships can successfully deliver governance services under certain conditions (both internal and external to the partnerships and their projects). As regards the overall effectiveness of transnational partnerships, a high degree of *institutionalization* and good *process management* correlates strongly with a high degree of effectiveness. For partnership projects in areas of limited statehood, it is the interplay, or rather the optimal match ('best fit'), between project design and the specific conditions in these areas that matters most for project success. Partnerships struggle in particular to achieve a broad, long-term *impact*. We have observed in numerous cases that even if good output and outcome are achieved, projects often prove to be unsustainable once funding has ended, or they fail to be successfully replicated or scaled up in other areas. In areas of limited statehood, the replication and scaling up of pilot projects often proves to be much more difficult and costly than expected (Liese et al. 2014).

This shows that partnerships have not been and may never be a 'silver bullet', but instead may at best be one element in a 'silver buckshot' approach, which utilizes various means of implementation (cf. Prins/Rayner 2007). In order to achieve this, however, partnerships must be designed and steered in a way that enables them to become effective tools.

In that regard, we wonder whether partnerships are governed effectively, not only internally but also on an overarching level. More specifically, we seek to investigate whether the experiences with the first generation of partnerships has led actors to ask for improvements in the *meta-governance* of partnerships on both the national and international level. Building on what these actors assess as the main *conditions* for the successful impact of partnerships in areas of limited statehood, we research what *consequences* actors draw from that: Are relevant actors intensifying or reducing their involvement in partnerships, or are their roles changing? We are particularly interested in finding out actors' views on an appropriate future *meta-governance* of partnerships.

In section 2 we discuss meta-governance as the rule-based steering of partnerships on an overarching level of decision-making. Based on this, we introduce our research design and explain how we currently investigate the meta-governance of partnerships. In the third section,



we present first insights, gained through a review of the literature and recent policy documents, interviews with actors as well as field research to observe expert and practitioner discussions. The final section lays out the preliminary results and directions for future research.

## **2. Meta-Governance of Transnational Partnerships**

### **2.1 Defining Meta-Governance**

Our current research focuses on the potential role of *meta-governance* for a next generation of partnerships (Abbott 2012; Glasbergen 2011; Hoxtell et al. 2010: 18; Wolf 2008). In general terms, meta-governance has been described as the “governing of governing” (Kooiman 2003: 170), the “regulation of self-regulation” (Sørensen 2006: 98), or the “organization of self-organization” (Jessop, 1998: 42; 2009). Meta-governance is a relatively new and not consistently defined concept in political science. Some time ago, Bell and Park (2006: 64) stated: “We know little about the dynamics of meta-governance, or about the relationship between governance and meta-governance.” While a growing body of literature may have closed that knowledge gap to some extent, much confusion still prevails due to the fact that many different concepts of meta-governance are being used. Meuleman (2008), for example, uses the notion of meta-governance to denote the ability of public administrators to shift between different modes of governance by markets, networks, or hierarchy. Christopoulos et al. (2012: 306) alternatively define meta-governance as the “reflexive coordination and organization of the framework conditions under which governance takes place.” In some instances, the literature speaks of *orchestration* (Abbott et al. 2015). In that case, the orchestrating entity – here the UN, a government agency, or a donor – attempts to orchestrate partnerships – as the intermediary actors – in order to provide target actors with governance services. The target actors would in our case operate in areas of limited statehood, and their services may be linked to overarching goals like the MDGs or SDGs.

For us, *meta-governance* is a concept used to denote a higher level of decision-making and is thus to be seen relative to the level at which the subordinate *governance*-related work by partnerships takes place. It is understood here as *higher-level rules that guide transnational partnerships*. These higher-level rules could be guidelines for partnerships’ institutional design, and/or criteria for the conduct of governance by partnerships (in our case with a special focus on their work in areas of limited statehood).

### **2.2 Research Design**

We posit that the meta-governance of partnerships can take different *forms* and influence partnership activities on several *levels*.

First, meta-governance may be exerted by *state* or *non-state actors*. Sørensen and Torfing (2005) argue that meta-governance allows *state actors* to govern complex decision-making processes, which may also involve non-state actors. Meta-governance “facilitates and constrains the policy processes in self-regulating networks without necessarily retreating to hierarchical command and domination” (Sørensen/Torfing 2005: 203). Rather, meta-governance as a method of governing leaves “considerable autonomy for stakeholders to govern themselves [...]” (Sørensen 2006: 99). Instead of direct steering, the state resorts to setting boundary conditions, monitoring the results, and adjusting the rules accordingly. This, however, could give meta-governors a substantial amount of (indirect) control over governance processes. Whitehead (2003) criticised this as he suspected that this control would come at the expense of non-state actors’ ability to co-govern such arrangements.

Other scholars postulate that *non-governmental* actors also have the ability to exercise meta-governance (Kooiman/Jentoft 2009). Derkx and Glasbergen (2014: 49) found that *private* meta-governance has indeed “some potential to address the ‘orchestration deficit.’” For Glasbergen (2011), governmental control is infeasible in complex governance arrangements. Meta-governance should thus not merely “focus on the development of public umbrella regulatory frameworks,” and instead it should be seen “as an endeavor to conditionally create and stimulate processes of change” (Glasbergen 2011: 195). Glasbergen contends that private efforts at meta-governance may be just as relevant as those undertaken by public actors, and there is no reason to assume a primacy of nation states on this higher level of decision-making. Analyzing meta-governance of partnerships should thus focus on both state and non-state actors.

Second, meta-governance can take place at the *national* and at the *international* or *transnational* level. On the national level, *governments* may set boundary conditions for governance activities to occur within their territory, including the activities of partnerships. Hence, we assess whether national legal frameworks and accountability institutions regulate and monitor partnership activities in areas of limited statehood, as well as what kind of funding mechanisms exist, and whether partnerships are considered legitimate actors (Franceys/Gerlach 2010; Winters 2010). Actors could also demand the creation of national multi-stakeholder platforms for partnerships with built-in accountability mechanisms.

On the *international level*, member states or bureaucracies of *international organizations* may establish rules for their engagement in partnerships. They may also decide upon conditions for the registration of partnerships, e.g. in UN databases, and the provision of associated benefits like material and non-material resources. Accordingly, we analyze meta-governance efforts of the UN (see below). Another possibility is meta-governance by *regional institutions*. Petersen (2010) sees the European Union as a potential meta-governor passing rules in the form of an overarching regulatory framework covering partnerships in all member states. A softer variant of regional meta-governance may be through UN Regional Conventions.

For the *transnational level*, Derkx and Glasbergen (2014) discuss several privately established forums that are engaged in meta-governance, including the International Social and Environmental

Accreditation and Labelling Alliance (ISEAL) that works on strengthening voluntary standards to make them more effective governance tools (see box).<sup>2</sup>

**ISEAL's private meta-governance (by Lili Mundle)**

ISEAL is a membership organization for multi-stakeholder sustainability standards that seeks to “strengthen sustainability standards systems for the benefit of people and the environment” (ISEAL 2013). It has created three meta-standards, or standards for standards. These seek to improve the effectiveness of standard-setting partnerships by providing guidelines on best practice regarding how to *set* standards, how to *assess the impact* of standards, and how to *verify assurance* with standards. ISEAL's meta-standards are created through a multi-stakeholder process incorporating both expert knowledge and the experiences of implementing actors. Members are required to comply with the meta-standards in order to achieve or retain their ISEAL membership. The ISEAL Secretariat provides a monitoring program to ensure compliance and continuous improvement based on the various meta-standards. It also provides enabling services, for example by serving as a collaborative platform, which includes networking, facilitated peer learning, as well as individualized support for standards systems. Interviews with members show that ISEAL's enabling and ensuring services are perceived to both be relevant for the successful implementation of the meta-standards (Mundle 2015).

Third, we differentiate between two approaches of meta-governance for partnerships that we call *enabling* and *ensuring*. Both may employ instruments that are either soft or hard, and we want to find out if and why actors may prefer one or the other. *Enabling* includes all forms of meta-governance that support and promote the founding and operating of partnerships. For example, enabling practices of meta-governance may take the form of promoting partnerships through legitimizing practices (Bäckstrand/Kylsäter 2014). This type of meta-governance has been exerted by the UN when endorsing partnerships as a tool to foster sustainable development. A more direct form of enabling is the establishment of institutions that support the formation and operation of partnerships, as the UN Global Compact does (Hoxtell et al. 2013). In a broader sense, enabling can refer to “find, found, and fund” new partnerships, as one representative from the private sector put it during the Post-2015 negotiations (IISD 2015). Providing knowledge-based capacity-building support to individual partners or to partnerships is an enabling activity, as is the provision of capital or training that allows partnership actors to access third-party funds. Another form of enabling is the provision of contacts and the introduction of partnership actors into local and/or national networks. Especially in areas of limited statehood, such introductory services into informal networks can be a critical factor for partnership success.

<sup>2</sup> In the realm of standards for standards, it has even been argued that several private meta-governance processes exist next to and interact with each other, generating new coordination problems (Fransen 2015).

Meta-governance can also be aiming at *ensuring* the success of partnerships through establishing formalized and binding rules of conduct. Such rules may require particular activities by partnerships or individual partners. Following the “transparency turn” in global governance (Gupta/Mason 2014), partnerships are increasingly required to provide annual reports and to participate in regular reviews or other accountability measures. The provision of such reports may even be linked to partnerships’ license to operate. We ask whether actors have preferences for certain *ex-ante* guidelines or *ex-post* evaluation criteria – for example, regarding their transparency, participation, or accountability (Conzelmann/Wolf 2008)? Do actors ask for meta-governance that intensifies the monitoring, sanctioning, institutional learning, or orientation towards sustainability (on a similar note, see Abbott 2012)? We expect such forms of meta-governance to be exerted mainly by governments. International organizations, however, could decide that specific accountability and monitoring requirements need to be met for partnerships when they want to register or collaborate with them. Or the UN Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) could issue either binding rules or recommendations for UN agencies when they engage in partnerships.

Figure 1: Examples of possible meta-governance measures differentiated by actors and levels

		Type of actor	
		State actors	Non-state actors
Level	National	<i>Enabling</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Legitimization and legal provisions allowing partnership activities</li> <li>• Supporting national institutions</li> <li>• Provision of public funds</li> </ul> <i>Ensuring</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Legal provisions like registration requirements or reporting duties</li> <li>• Monitoring partnership activities</li> </ul>	<i>Enabling</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge-based capacity-building</li> <li>• Brokering / networking (support with market entry and access to local and national decision-makers)</li> <li>• Provision of private capital</li> </ul> <i>Ensuring</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (Voluntary) standards</li> <li>• Reporting requirements</li> <li>• (Peer) review procedures</li> </ul>
	International	<i>Enabling</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Legitimization</li> <li>• Supporting international institutions</li> <li>• Provision of public funds</li> </ul> <i>Ensuring</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (Binding) Standards</li> <li>• Active monitoring</li> <li>• (Public) review requirements</li> </ul>	<i>Enabling</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge-based capacity-building</li> <li>• Networking (access to transnational actors)</li> <li>• Provision of private capital</li> </ul> <i>Ensuring</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (Voluntary) standards</li> <li>• Reporting requirements</li> <li>• (Peer) review procedures</li> </ul>

### 2.3 Focusing on Actors' Perspectives

In our research, we focus on the *perspectives of relevant actors* involved in or dealing with partnerships and the *consequences* they may have drawn from their involvement in and observation of partnerships. We seek to assess whether lessons learned about existing partnerships lead those actors to reassess partnership meta-governance. In that context, we ask relevant actors three questions (see Fig. 2). Firstly, we ask how they see meta-governance for partnerships in principle; whether they are already engaged in meta-governance activities or plan to do so; and which other actors and institutions they see in the role of meta-governors. We also want to know the reasoning behind their preferred design and elements of meta-governance rules. Our second research question concerns whether the actors' preferences regarding meta-governance are based on an analyses of successes and failures of past and present partnerships. Thirdly, we ask whether and to what extent actors see meta-governance itself as an important success factor for partnerships. If so, we analyze the rationale behind this and, more specifically, what success conditions have been identified to inform the particular choice of meta-governance. In particular, we are interested in analyzing the link between lessons learned in areas of limited statehood and the preferred form of meta-governance for such activities of partnerships, asking whether concrete incentives, guidelines, and support is being demanded or offered for partnership activities in areas of limited statehood? In this process, we are also matching lessons and success conditions with those we identified in the first two phases of our research project.

Figure 2: Research questions on meta-governance

- 1) What kind of *meta-governance* do actors propose (or even provide) for sustainable development (SD) partnerships and how do they argue in that context?
- 2) Do lessons learned on *success conditions* (especially in areas of limited statehood) inform the (proposals for) meta-governance for partnerships – and if so, how?
- 3) Do actors argue that (a lack of) meta-governance influences the long-term, broader *impact* of SD partnerships (in areas of limited statehood) and what *causal* mechanisms do they point out?

With our approach, we seek to bring a new perspective to the growing body of research on meta-governance as we investigate the origins and development of such higher-level rules. Of course, we build on existing knowledge. Past research shows that *international organizations* and *donor institutions* have in recent years been placing a stronger focus on both monitoring and producing measurable results with widespread impact. Such ideas have also been discussed repeatedly in the context of partnerships (see UNGC 2007) but have not yet been put into practice. As early as 2005, a report of the UN Secretary General (UNSG) (A/60/214) (UNGA 2005) and the subsequent resolution of the UN General Assembly, Towards Global Partnerships (A/RES/60/215) (UNGA 2006) made explicit reference to the necessity for partnerships to be developed further in the direction of sustainable impact. Both documents criticized the lack of a functioning mechanism for systematic impact assessment and internalizing lessons learned. To remedy this and other shortcomings, several UN initiatives were started (see section 3.1).



The *partnership actors themselves* are struggling, on the one hand, to meet growing demands from their partners and donors to demonstrate rapidly visible results and, on the other hand, to cope with time-consuming start-up processes in areas of limited statehood. Partnerships are also operating based on an assumed win-win situation. Yet especially in fragile areas, the participating partners have to allocate resources for local capacity building before the initial successes and outputs can be achieved. The motivation or resources for this, however, are often lacking. Profit-oriented *companies* have therefore gradually reduced their involvement in many partnership projects over time (see also Bull 2010; Hale/Mauzerall 2004). Many realized that the business case in areas of limited statehood was much harder to build than originally hoped. In response, the secretariats of the respective partnerships have had to mobilize public funds to build local capacities, the lack of which was impeding rapid project success. Critical actors go even further in pointing out the general *limits* of the partnership approach (Utting/Zammit 2009; Thalwitz 2012). As indicated above, our own research finds that fragile security situations and poor local infrastructures dampen the investment spirits of business partners (Liese et al. 2014). It is an open question which of these problems can be compensated for with better meta-governance, an adaptive institutional design or capacity development measures, and what are the limits of such an approach. A comprehensive review of partnership activities could also help to answer such questions.

Given these challenges, how do relevant actors assess the role of meta-governance? They, for example, might find partnerships to be better suited for some tasks and areas than for others. How do they assume meta-governance might be helpful, and how might it be harmful? Would specific guidelines make sense for different types of partnerships to achieve their desired impacts (OECD 2008; Malena 2004)? What do actors think about attempts to establish private approaches to meta-governance, such as the “Code of Good Practice for Setting Social and Environmental Standards” of the ISEAL Alliance or the guidelines of the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI)? We will also ask what the key resources are private actors need to have at their disposal if they intend to engage in meta-governance (Sørensen 2006).

Moreover, we will also ask for possible negative *side effects* of meta-governance. Overly ambitious accountability measures such as comprehensive and binding review mechanisms may increase bureaucratic costs to a point where the partnership model is no longer considered advantageous. If the UN should decide to put up monitoring rules, partnerships may find it more practical to implement their project ideas without the involvement of the UN System. If monitoring covers all partnerships registered with the UN, this may even create an incentive to not register the partnership at all as it would increase the burden of monitoring without providing compensating benefits. In fact, many partnerships have never been registered with the CSD, and likewise many of them are not included in UN’s “SD in Action Registry.” Experts have also pointed out the negative effects that may come along with the rise of an “evaluation industry” (Utting/Zammit 2009). We expect some actors to rather opt for an *enabling* forum that, rather than discouraging partnerships from registering, provides for incentive structures, e.g. through the provision of best practice guides, support in setting up secretariats, or enabling measures (Freeman/Wisheart 2014a: 8).

In our future research, we will also investigate the extent to which *actors in areas of limited statehood* are calling for the meta-governance of partnerships. *State actors* in fragile areas are interested first and foremost in capacity building. In the cases we have studied so far, fears that partnership activities are weakening governments' administrative capacities have not been confirmed. To the contrary, partnerships staff had to build government capacities in order to achieve successful medium and long-term results in areas of limited statehood (see Beisheim/Liese 2014; cf. Bateley/McCloughlin 2010). Therefore we ask: Are government agencies calling for such capacity building within their own administrative structures while working toward providing certain governance services in cooperation with partners in the future (see De Juan 2011; Bold et al. 2009)? Are state actors in areas of limited statehood willing and able to effectively steer the external interventions into development cooperation, interventions which have increased substantially through partnership projects (Mwenga 2009)? Are they capable of expanding meta-governance for partnerships in this process? To what extent are donors and IOs in a position to provide support for such national-level meta-governance of partnerships? We will also ask various non-governmental actors and beneficiaries about their ideas. Figure 3 presents a number of propositions on potential consequences actors may be drawing – or appear to have already drawn – from their involvement in transnational partnerships.

Figure 3: Propositions on potential consequences for actors involved in partnerships that are active in areas of limited statehood

- Donors, state actors in partner countries, and international organizations are increasingly forced into the role of “governance managers” (Beisheim et al. 2011). Often, however, they end up merely muddling through instead of engaging in meta-governance.
- NGOs involved in a partnership are criticized by other NGOs when that partnership does not contribute visibly to medium-term solutions. This leads NGOs to split into fractions: Those that want to cooperate with the business community and IOs, and those that oppose such cooperation. Most NGOs ask (inter-)governmental institutions to exercise increased control.
- Many external economic actors tend to pull out after initial experiences when there is no business case established and do not contribute further skills or resources to partnerships.
- Partnership secretariats end up under pressure to find public donors to build the necessary capacities in areas of limited statehood.
- Affected user groups and involved community-based organizations (CBOs) in target areas profit initially from capacity building, but after external funding comes to an end, find it challenging to continue mobilizing their members and organizing themselves without any incentives or external support.
- Local economic actors profit from their involvement in partnership projects by improving their image and gaining comparative advantages while simultaneously edging out competitors.
- Clientelistic power structures and local big men may be strengthened by attempts to involve local authorities in project implementation. In some cases, this may impede social change, but it may also lead to the emergence of new governance actors.

In order to answer our research questions and follow-up on these propositions, we are currently involved in several empirical investigations:

- an *online survey* is being completed by actors involved in partnership activities, including UN officials, national government representatives, academics, and members of partnerships;
- in-depth *interviews* were conducted/are being conducted to gain a more nuanced picture of actors' perspectives on meta-governance approaches and their effects on partnerships;
- and through *participatory observation* at relevant forums, including the UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, we get a general impression on actors' positions on meta-governance.

While the investigation is ongoing, we present first impressions in this working paper.

### **3. First Insights on Actors' Ideas on the UN's Meta-Governance for Partnerships**

#### **3.1 Early Attempts of UN Meta-Governance for Partnerships**

This first section presents a short review of attempts at meta-governing partnerships between the WSSD in 2002 and Rio+20 in 2012. The following section focuses on actors' assessment of more recent meta-governance proposals and efforts.

Most partnerships for sustainable development were launched under the WSSD (see Brinkerhoff 2002; Nelson 2002; Tesner/Kell 2000) and beginning in 2004, were registered in the database of the CSD (see Bäckstrand et al. 2012; Pattberg et al. 2012). However, other than very general guidelines, there have never been stringent rules for or a comprehensive review of partnerships (Bäckstrand/Kylsäter 2014; Beisheim 2012, 2015). During our recent interviews, (former) UN staff pointed out that there was neither political will to create strong institutions nor a mandate for a rigid follow-up after the WSSD in 2002 – and that this might have been a mistake.

Early attempts at meta-governing partnerships began during the preparatory phase of the 2002 WSSD (Dodds 2015: 6-7). In January 2002, the UNGA passed the first of since then biannually agreed upon resolutions called Towards Global Partnerships. This first resolution, A/RES/56/76 (UNGA 2002), laid out a few basic principles for partnership activities. These included a common purpose and transparency, but primarily stated that partnerships should be carried out in accordance with UN principles. In June 2002, following a series of informal meetings at the fourth preparatory session of the World Summit (PrepCom IV), the two vice chairs proposed the so-called Bali Guiding Principles, containing overarching rules for multi-stakeholder partnerships. Between PrepCom IV and CSD-11 in 2003, these principles were used to decide whether a partnership would be taken up within the CSD Registry.



At CSD-11, governments updated these principles in light of both the Bali Guidelines and UNGA resolution A/RES/56/76 (UNGA 2002). This renewed set of principles, stated in Article 22 of the CSD-11 decision, was both of an enabling and ensuring nature. It stated *inter alia* that partnerships should contribute to the implementation of Agenda 21 and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation; that they should have an added value and be new; that they should be designed in a transparent and accountable manner; that they should be consistent with national laws and international frameworks; that they should be publicly announced; and that their lead partner “should inform the national focal point for sustainable development of the involved country/countries about the initiation and progress of the partnership [...]” Furthermore, Article 23 established rules for registering and monitoring of partnerships. While it stated that reporting “should be voluntary and be based on written reporting to the Commission,” it should also be “transparent, participatory and credible.” These rules, however, were never fully implemented, and thus no operative system for *ensuring* partnerships’ success was established.

In contrast, the UN has been more active in fostering an *enabling* framework for partnerships after 2000. With regards to transnational partnerships, the UN has made a number of institutional changes to foster their establishment (Hoxtell et al. 2010). These changes include the designation of UN private sector focal points in most UN agencies and training of UN staff to fulfil their roles accordingly. A measure for *ensuring* due diligence was the establishment of system-wide “Guidelines on Cooperation between the United Nations and the Business Sector” in 2000 and their revision in 2009, which are accompanied by individually established guidelines within several UN agencies. Last but not least were steps to enhance both inter-agency coordination through the “One UN” approach as well as UN-business collaboration on the country level (for an overview of UN-business relations see Fortin/Jolly 2015).

With the establishment of the Global Compact, the UN has redefined its relationship with the private sector (Rasche 2012; Kell et al. 2007). Since its inception in 2000, the Global Compact has served as the institutionalized forum for collaboration between the UN System and the private sector. As such, it promotes and supports the establishment of partnerships, e.g. through knowledge-sharing and capacity building, for example in the form of workshops. Inter-agency coordination on UN-business interaction is fostered through the facilitation of the Private Sector Focal Point Meetings, whereas improved collaboration on the national and local level is achieved through the Global Compact Local Networks. In terms of ensuring measures, the Global Compact relies on voluntary measures. In 2007, for example, the Global Compact, together with other UN agencies, jointly developed the Partnership Assessment Tool, a CD-Rom with a self-assessment and learning tool. Only a few private partners, however, employed it on a voluntary basis. More recently, the Global Compact published the UN-Business Partnerships Handbook that discusses a supportive environment and seven building blocks that define critical success factors for a designing an appropriate partnership that can achieve desired outcomes (Hoxtell et al. 2013). In 2011, the Global Compact LEAD Task Force on UN-Business Partnerships made three recommendations for enhancing the governance of partnerships: First, “co-create solutions around joint priorities” by establishing centralized UN Global

Thematic Leads and developing a “UN Partnership Brand”; second to “focus on accountability for outcomes” through a “results- and outcome-based monitoring and evaluation framework” that should also be used as a learning tool for active partnerships; and third to establish a “Partnership Accelerator Facility” for offering “advisory, training, legal, and financing services” to foster the creation of new partnerships and thus enhancing the enabling framework of the UN System (Global Compact 2011: 20-22).

The UN Office for Partnerships (UNOP) was established in 2006 and is tasked with strengthening system-wide coherence and supporting partnership initiatives to engage public and private sector stakeholders in the implementation of the Millennium Declaration and the MDGs. UNOP oversees the UN Fund for International Partnerships (UNFIP) and it provides Partnership Advisory and Outreach Services (PAOS). UNFIP was established in 1998 by the Secretary-General as a trust fund to serve as an interface with the UN Foundation, which manages the US\$1 billion donation from Ted Turner to support the UN and its goals. The PAOS assist non-UN institutions in dealing with UN procedures and in the design of programmes and projects to enhance implementation of the MDGs. Assessing whether UNOP has the capacities to achieve its goals, the 2009 Audit Report of the UN Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) on the management of UNFIP found that it “has exercised a leadership role,” but that a more comprehensive framework to guide, monitor, and oversee partnerships was required. Furthermore, the report indicates that criteria for entering into partnerships, guidelines, and monitoring tools need to be determined (OIOS 2009: 4). During our interview, UNOP staff made clear that the UN should set the agenda and UNOP could then bring partners together and support the process of building partnerships, but that it cannot and should not run or drive such partnerships. Other interview partners also felt that UNOP should concentrate on training and capacity building. Most felt that (ex-ante and/or ex-post) impact assessments are needed but should be done by an impartial third entity.

It quickly became clear that UNFIP and the Global Compact share some overlaps. Back in 2002, UNSG Kofi Annan proposed in his reform plan to establish a Partnership Office, “to regroup under one common umbrella” the Global Compact Office (GCO) and UNFIP (cf. Martens 2007: 57). Instead, with the creation of UNOP the separation of the two institutions became stronger, and the overlaps remained unresolved. This was recognized in a report by the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) in 2010, which again recommended to:

“...regroup the GCO and UNOP under one umbrella, building on their complementarities and distinctive roles, and clearly delineate their respective responsibilities [...] so that the GCO can focus on the implementation of the ten principles by businesses, and UNOP on developing United Nations business partnerships and related capacities.” (Fall/Zahran 2010: 8).

Thus far, no such regrouping has taken place, and the most recent attempt to build a Partnership Facility has also failed (see below). The JIU report also recommended to “undertake an independent evaluation of lessons learned from current partnerships before entering into new

ones” (Fall/Zahran 2010: 23). As of today, the Global Compact supports and advises practitioners on how to build appropriate partnerships. In terms of tracking, it relies on self-assessments. In our recent interviews, GCO secretariat staff confirmed that the Global Compact attempts to further build this kind of enabling environment. This is done through revamping their online Partnership Hub and better aligning the UN focal points network and the Global Compact local network meetings, by having these meetings back-to-back in the future and thereby exploring opportunities for partnerships in a bottom-up fashion.

### 3.2 Current Attempts of UN Meta-Governance for Partnerships

The above findings about early attempts might explain why most of our interview partners felt that a more effective meta-governance especially in terms of *ensuring* partnerships’ success would be desirable. While conceding that “the UN cannot do everything,” as one interviewee put it, most agree that reforms are necessary. In fact, the UN has already begun to implement a number of reforms with regard to enabling and ensuring multi-stakeholder partnerships for sustainable development.

At the Rio+20 conference in 2012, several reforms of the UN sustainability institutions were adopted that will also affect how partnerships are dealt with at the international level (Beisheim 2012; Beisheim et al. 2012). First of all, a new SD in Action Registry has been created. It contains a cleaned-up list of the Johannesburg Partnerships as well as the Rio+20 voluntary commitments and appears to impose stricter requirements for registration than the old CSD database did. For example, it asks for periodic self-reporting. The UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs’ (UNDESA) info-note on requirements for registration states:

“All commitments to be registered should be specific, measurable, funded, new ... In order to facilitate periodic reporting on progress of implementation, it is important that at least one tangible deliverable is specified, along with the estimated timeline for completion.” (UNCSD 2012).

In the context of the new 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, UNDESA is currently revamping the registry “as a tool to inform stakeholders on initiatives carried out by multi-stakeholder partnerships around the world in support of the sustainable development goals, track progress, and share innovative ideas” (UNDESA 2015d). The plan is to launch a beta-version of the online platform “Partnerships for SDGs” at the UN Summit in September. In October, DESA plans for an online survey, seeking “views of all interested stakeholders on a number of issues related to the role of multi-stakeholder partnerships in advancing the sustainable development goals, and the supporting role of this platform” (UNDESA 2015d). The full version of the new online platform is projected to be launched in January 2016.

So far, however, UNDESA’s mandate does not include a strong mechanism for monitoring or ensuring accountability. All initiatives are asked to provide voluntary periodic reports on their

activities. To this end, UNDESA provides a downloadable questionnaire on the SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, resource-based, and time-bound) criteria that initiatives are asked to use as a guideline for their activities. The monthly SD in Action newsletter and an annual special report are planned as means of providing information on the partnerships' reports (UNDESA 2013, 2015c). UNDESA's 2015 report on partnerships, for example, focuses on learning and knowledge-sharing, which was also the topic of an Expert Group Meeting (EGM) in June 2015 and an accompanying background paper (UNDESA 2015c; Atkisson 2015). While the report also claims to review a number of multi-stakeholder partnerships, it remains unclear, however, whether all initiatives in the registry are actually complying with the reporting requirement. In the Global Compact, initiatives that fail to submit reports are reminded, and then if they still fail to respond, excluded. Our interview partners, however, point out that Member States wanted to see big numbers in the past, and therefore did not give UNDESA the mandate or authority to delist non-reporting initiatives from the registry. In that context, some experts suggest that incoming reports should be published on the SD in Action Registry website with a comment function, or that partnerships should follow an open data policy about their activities (UNDESA 2015c). This would enable stakeholders to visibly scrutinize these reports and expose those initiatives that do not work in a transparent and accountable manner.

In a similar fashion, the Natural Resources Defence Council (NRDC) launched the Cloud of Commitments (NRDC 2012). This was an attempt to pilot an enabling and ensuring platform – as an instance of private meta-governance. Our interview partner, however, admitted that it was difficult to find reliable long-term funding for the endeavor. Therefore, the NRDC now supports a de-centralized network approach, with a UN-led core part of it. NRDC and other NGOs like World Vision also favour national platforms, as single multi-stakeholder platforms with built-in accountability mechanisms for partnerships at country level. In that context, many interview partners point at the work of the Partnering Initiative that proposes the establishment of “platforms for partnerships” as parts of the infrastructure “that is necessary to scale up public-private collaboration for post-2015 development” (Reid et al. 2015: 4; see also Gilbert/Jenkins 2014). Other interview partners also take up the idea of a multi-layered “backbone structure” (originally proposed for the internal governance of partnerships, see Patscheke et al. 2014 and Hazlewood 2015). Early in the Post-2015 process, World Vision favored a combination of such national platforms with one global platform for each goal (see Freeman/Wisheart 2014a, 2015). World Vision was one of the very few actors that also developed specific suggestions for partnerships in *fragile* situations. Here, they suggest to use those national platforms “to determine how cross-sector partnerships might be used to meet the specific needs of the most vulnerable” (Freeman/Wisheart 2014b: 21). Our recent interview with World Vision shows, however, that they now focus more on concrete and realistic ways to enhance the handling of individual partnerships, which they continue to see as a valuable part of their work.

Most other NGO representatives tend to be much more critical of partnerships and voice a profound distrust in them. Several interviewees framed partnerships in terms of privatization and undue private sector influence, a position which can also be found in NGO publications (Martens 2014; Friends of the Earth International et al. 2012). Hence, for them, partnerships are

to be avoided or only a second-best option. Instead, they would prefer to strengthen the state, multilateral institutions, and civil society driven collaborations. More moderate NGOs demand that a strong meta-governance framework needs to be in place *before* going for partnerships. These interview partners stressed that this would not only entail securing due diligence but strong public institutions and a regulatory framework with strict ex-ante criteria, guidelines, and impact assessments by an impartial entity (see also, for example, IBON 2015).

During our interviews, all NGO representatives agreed on the need for standards and the necessity to build partnerships in a bottom-up, participatory, and context-sensitive fashion, in order to also secure local ownership. One NGO representative suggested to use the Major Groups system as a basis for developing such “collaborations.” Across many interviewees from all backgrounds, there was a noticeable uneasiness with the term “partnerships,” and stakeholders have apparently begun to experiment with alternative designations like “cooperation” and “collaboration.” This is due to the unclear definition of partnerships, their contested role, and their mixed track record in the past.

On a *regional* level, the UN has begun to build a model for a more comprehensive enabling and ensuring framework for partnerships. The basis for this was laid out at the Third International Conference on Small Island Developing States (SIDS Conference) held in September 2014. The outcome document, called the SIDS Accelerated Modalities of Action or Samoa Pathway, requests that the UNSG, in paragraph 101, develop recommendations on building “a partnership framework to monitor and ensure the full implementation of pledges and commitments through partnerships.” This framework should be used to monitor the contributions of partnerships and ensure that they are in line with priorities of SIDS as well as identifying opportunities to enhance sustainable development, all in line with agreed upon goals (UNDESA 2015a). UNDESA has built an online database, the SIDS Action Platform, containing 302 SIDS-related partnerships. After consulting with stakeholders, including through the first SIDS Partnership Dialogue in June 2015 (UNDESA 2015b), the UNDESA Secretariat formulated six recommendations for the SIDS Partnerships Framework. These include the establishment of an informal steering group for guiding follow-up activities, regional and national multi-stakeholder dialogues, the development of a reporting mechanism, and the continuation of the SIDS Action Platform (UNDESA 2015a). This framework has been described by one interviewee as a test case for a possible more comprehensive global framework for partnerships.

Regarding the UN, many interview partners refer to the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF). According to its mandate, the HLPF is to provide “political leadership, guidance and recommendations” and to “follow up and review progress in the implementation of sustainable development commitments” (UNGA 2013c: Para 2). An important element of its work will be the *voluntary review process* envisioned by the HLPF mandate, which is supposed to start in 2016. Review processes aim to provide transparency, learning, and accountability, and to build political will and foster ownership of the implementation process. The precise structure of the HLPF review, however, is still not clear (Beisheim 2014, 2015). Above all, the new review mechanism is supposed to monitor and follow up the implementation of the 2030 Agenda



and SDGs. The mandate of the HLPF stipulates that the future HLPF review “shall provide a *platform for partnerships*” (see UNGA 2013c: Para 8c, emphasis added). However, what this precisely means still needs to be specified, as the design of this platform and its relationship with the UN System is still to be decided upon. Member States are debating whether partnerships should be subject to that review process. Experts and our interview partners came up with various ideas for such a platform in the context of the future review process at the HLPF:

Many interview partners suggested the HLPF should discuss and continue to develop *guidelines and criteria* for the Post-2015 partnerships. Some interview partners explicitly referred to the Bali Guidelines and suggested to have them revised by either ECOSOC (see Dodds 2015), the HLPF, or use their content together with other UN norms and standards as a basis to come up with new baselines and criteria.

All of our interview partners agree that the international community should be able to distinguish successful partnerships from failures and to *systematically review and evaluate* which of these initiatives merit public support for scaling up. Most found the annual CSD Partnership Fair and the Rio+20 Partnership Forum were a disappointment in that respect; instead of systematic and critical evaluations both were merely showcasing alleged successes (see also Bäckstrand/Kylsäter 2014). While the review should indeed incentivise and reward frontrunners, most interview partners want it to also address gaps and challenges. Many of our interview partners suggested to rebuild the ECOSOC Partnership Forum for this. Many criticised it as relying too much on anecdotal evidence, and want it to be more systematic and go beyond showcasing. One NGO representative proposed to have an “SD Week,” back-to-back with the ECOSOC Integration Forum in April/May each year, with universal and also heavy civil society participation and then to integrate the Partnership Forum in that context. All interview partners with knowledge about UN procedures pointed at the need to have intergovernmental backing and a mandate for such reforms. Alternatively, UN staff suggested to use established instruments like Expert Group Meetings, SD Learning Centres or to set up a Group of Friends for partnerships and to have one afternoon session on partnerships at the annual HLPF under the auspices of ECOSOC – as more “realistic” options. At the same time, other UN staff emphasized that it is crucial to discuss partnerships in an integrated way and not in parallel to intergovernmental meetings, as this has proven to be unhelpful in the past.

Many of our interview partners preferred to design the future review in a *decentralized* fashion: UN entities should be asked to review “their” partnerships and report on the results to the HLPF. Individual respondents suggested that a harmonized format for conducting such reviews of UN-based partnerships could be issued through the UNSG, the CEB, or the UN Development Group. Some interview partners embraced the idea of having one “meta-partnership” for each goal or even each target, combined with a system of task managers (Dodds 2015). Others fear that such an approach would again result in silos, which does not sufficiently mirror the integrated nature of the SDGs. One interview partner suggested having an independent “ethics office” to be tasked with handling due diligence and disclosure issues. Several of our interview partners pointed out that the UN should focus on the review of UN-related partnerships only, not all

partnerships, as the UN simply does not have the capacities for that. Beyond that, however, transnational initiatives could be allowed to apply for participation in the voluntary HLPF thematic reviews independently, whereas national initiatives could be reviewed as part of national efforts (Beisheim 2014, 2015). Beyond that, Bernstein suggested that the HLPF should be able to also commission independent “third-party reviews” (Bernstein 2013; Bernstein et al. 2014).

Going a step further, some interview partners preferred a review of partnerships *outside of the UN*. Only then would a truly open, innovative, and critical assessment be possible, which would also allow for admitting problems and analyzing failure cases. For this to be successful, they suggested to have the agenda of such a meeting decided by involved stakeholders (and not by the UN) and to invite research institutes to participate. An interview partner suggested that while an independent multi-stakeholder body should convene such a platform, the UN could endorse it. Results could be channelled back to the HLPF via a high-level panel with members serving in their personal capacity. To further incentivize a high degree of openness, another interviewee pointed out that a different perspective on failure as an opportunity for learning and improving was necessary. As the UNDESA report states: “Few partnerships engage in adaptive management, and even fewer will share negative news about their work” (UNDESA 2015c: 25). To change this may require a different donor approach to funding so that failing at a project would not be immediately be punished by withdrawing funds, but instead successful learning from failure would be rewarded by increased funding.

Last but not least, the UNSG proposed the founding of a new Partnership Facility to ensure accountability, integrity, and transparency (UNGA 2013a: Para 69). The Partnership Facility was included in the UNSG’s “proposed programme budget for the biennium 2014-2015” (A/86/6 Sect. 1) (UNSG 2014b). It had envisioned a total budget of US\$ 14.4 million, most of which should be provided through extrabudgetary resources, and a staff of 23. It was supposed to replace UNOP and become the host of UNFIP, and through the Office of the Under-Secretary General for Partnership it was planned to be linked to the Global Compact Office. While all of our interview partners agreed that there is need for a better handling of partnerships at the UN, they had differing assessments of why the idea of a central Partnership Facility failed. All agreed that the issue was approached in a much too top-down, heavy-budget fashion – and that this was not helpful. Some pointed out that the aforementioned UN entities value their independence and did not want to be integrated. Others mentioned that most Member States did not want the Facility to be under the UNSG as they prefer a state-led institution, while some did not want it at all because they feared too much uncontrolled private sector influence. Yet other interview partners hint at personal quarrels between those involved. Whichever factor may have been the most crucial one, it stands clear that due to controversies with Member States over its form and the process by which it was promoted, the Facility will not be realized. It is uncertain whether some other entity with a similar mandate will be created in the near future.

#### 4. Preliminary Results and Future Research

A first result of our empirical research is the insight that while most actors agree there is need to learn from the past and to better handle partnerships in the future, they do not (yet?) have a clear vision of what an improved meta-governance of partnerships should look like, including at the UN level. While a few actors initially had some “grand design” ideas for partnerships within the 2030 Agenda, there now seems to be a tendency to go for a piecemeal approach and a more decentralized design that most deem to be more realistic.

Moreover, hardly anyone knew of existing or suggested future meta-governance provisions that pay specific attention to partnership activities in *areas of limited statehood*. Instead, ideas for meta-governance were rooted in perceptions of what may be institutionally feasible and politically possible. In terms of success conditions and design, however, most interview partners mentioned the relevance of a bottom-up, adaptive, context-specific, or tailored approach that partnerships should apply – a view that comes very close to the ‘best fit’ institutional design of partnerships that we found to be a major success factor in areas of limited statehood (Liese/Beisheim 2014). Yet hardly anyone suggested UN meta-governance would be appropriate as a top-down one-size-fits-all design. Instead, we came across the idea of using national platforms or community committees to develop such a design in a participatory way, including local stakeholders and marginalized groups.

Most of our interview partners stated that heralding partnerships as a key means of achieving sustainable development should not take place without an improved framework that offers both the necessary *enabling support* for partnerships and also oversight mechanisms for *ensuring* successful implementation of partnerships. While civil society organizations tend to focus on the latter, respondents working with business mostly focus on the former.

Furthermore, regarding the preferences of actors in our first set of interviews, we see *three different patterns*: Two with the UN in a central position, and one locating meta-governance largely outside of the UN. While the latter is purely based on voluntary and multi-stakeholder initiatives, the two former rely either on hard modes or on relatively soft modes of governance.

(1) Those seeking hard modes of governance envision a *strong role for the UN*, with strict and binding rules for business in general and for UN-business cooperation in particular. Based on stringent principles and strong review mechanisms, the due diligence of all partners and partnerships alongside these UN principles and goals is aimed for with this approach.

(2) Other interviewees emphasize that the UN cannot do everything. Rather, the UN should *focus on guidance*, identifying best practices and gaps. Several interviewees took up the language used in the draft outcome document for the UN Sustainable Development Summit 2015 which mentions the HLPF as a potential “apex body” that will discuss the results of various voluntary sectoral, regional, and national *reviews* at an aggregate meta-level and that will most likely also review partnerships’ contributions. Some actors, however, cautioned against overburdening



the UN in general, and the HLPF in particular, pointing at the low capacity of the UN to matchmake, orchestrate and coordinate, monitor, and review partnerships. All actors criticize the current ad-hoc approach to review and learning based on anecdotal evidence as well as the under-utilization of the Partnership Forum and other venues to engage in open discussions about difficulties and failures in implementing partnerships. Indeed, learning from failure was repeatedly mentioned as a necessary element for improving governance by partnerships, yet existing UN mechanisms appear to only result in showcasing of success stories.

(3) For that reason, some interviewees argue for establishing a public-private institution *outside the UN*, for example a multi-stakeholder forum for partnerships. Earlier attempts to build such private forms of meta-governance show, however, that it is not easy to find the necessary resources for that. Once established, such a platform could be used by interested partners to exchange information and especially to more openly discuss how they are dealing with struggling partnership projects.

Some interview partners *opt against any form of meta-governance*. They point at the practical difficulties and unwanted effects of formulating binding rules for a large number of widely differing partnerships, thus hampering innovation and flexibility.

In 2016, we will continue to investigate the ideas and proposals of relevant actors. We expect the discussion around UN meta-governance for multi-stakeholder partnerships to gain traction once the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has been adopted in September 2015 and the implementation phase begins. The newly elected President of ECOSOC, Ambassador Oh Joon, Permanent Representative of the Republic of Korea, has the building of multi-stakeholder partnerships as an explicit point on his agenda for ECOSOC under his watch. We will assess how the above mentioned ideas and plans for UN meta-governance are being developed and to what extent they are actually realized. We feel that key questions need further clarification: What exactly should the UN do and what should others do? How should sectoral and private components and mechanisms be linked, possibly with the HLPF as the “apex body”? Beyond that, we will also investigate ideas for the meta-governance of partnerships at the local and national level.

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## Research Framework

Governance has become a central theme in social science research. The Collaborative Research Center (SFB) 700 Governance in Areas of Limited Statehood investigates governance in areas of limited statehood, i.e. developing countries, failing and failed states, as well as, in historical perspective, different types of colonies. How and under what conditions can governance deliver legitimate authority, security, and welfare, and what problems are likely to emerge? Operating since 2006 and financed by the German Research Foundation (DFG), the Research Center involves the Freie Universität Berlin, the University of Potsdam, the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), the Social Science Research Center Berlin (WZB) and the German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA).

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